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## Tips for Monitoring Your Teen's Use of Digital Technologies

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For teens, personal technology devices like computers, hand-held computers (i.e., Blackberries) and cell phones can provide a wealth of positive information and connection to a greater community. In many families, these are also providing convenient new ways for kids and grown-ups to keep in touch throughout the day and to consult with one another as plans and schedules change. However, unsupervised technology use can also open a world of temptation and misinformation on topics such as drugs, sex, and other risky behaviors.

Kids want and need the kind of trust between themselves and their parents and other care-giving adults that only a continuous pattern or regular, healthy give-and-take communication can establish. But parents also need to know that their trust isn't being violated. Kids can't always be counted on to use digital technologies appropriately. Sometimes they stumble into danger unknowingly. They need guidance and rules. Here are some tips to keep them on the right track:

- **Limit your teen's time spent online** , and put computers in a common area of the house so you can more easily monitor use.
- **Be clear and consistent about what is off limits**—including Web sites, chat rooms, games, blogs, or certain music downloads—and how to handle information promoting drugs or sex. Discuss consequences for breaking the rules.
- **Enforce the consequences.** The more meaningful the consequence to the teen, the less likely she will break the rules. For example, if you catch your teen instant messaging (IM'ing) someone he doesn't personally know, take computer, Blackberry or cell phone privileges away for an extended period of time. You can also restrict or prohibit use of these devices as a consequence for breaking curfew, coming home smelling of smoke or alcohol, or exhibiting other signs of substance abuse.
- **Learn about the digital devices your teen uses.** Teens' cell phones are living diaries of their friends, activities, and whereabouts. Know the people who are listed in your teen's electronic phone book and learn how to review recent calls and text messages. (Check the cell phone manual for instructions on how.) If a strange number appears, ask about it.
- **Visit your teen's Web site or personal blog** . Review your teen's profile, pictures, video, and music uploads. Also check out the links that your teen includes on his page. These will give you a candid view of his/her thoughts on issues like drugs and dating as well as an inside glimpse of your teen's friends and activities. Check out her "network," as well, and what type of information is on her friends' sites.
- **Monitor your teen's e-mails and instant messaging** . Know whom your teen is communicating with online. Ask who is on his cell phone and instant message contact lists. Ask to review his e-mail address book on a regular basis and who unfamiliar

addresses represent. Use every available opportunity to meet and get to know those friends and their parents.

- **Remind your teens that the Internet is public space** and anyone, including college admissions offices, potential employers, and even predators, can see what they're posting online. Talk to your teen about not posting personally identifiable information or regrettable pictures/videos and information.
- **Make sure your teen knows that everything "on the Web" isn't necessarily legal.** Alcohol, tobacco, illicit and prescription drugs are all marketed on the Internet, along with weapons, pornography, and opportunities for real-world sexual liaisons. Young people need help understanding that many things offered to them via the Internet may be illegal, as well as dangerous. Talk to them about letting you know if they receive personal messages encouraging them to engage in illegal behaviors so that you can notify the appropriate authorities.
- **Use technology to help monitor your teen.** See for yourself what's posted on social networking sites (i.e., MySpace.com) your teen visits by setting up your own account. Use text messaging to check in with your teen after school. If your teen has a camera phone, have her send a picture of where she is and who she is with. If she is supposed to be at a school football game, tell your teen to take a picture of herself with friends in the stands.
- **If you suspect, go the extra mile.** Some technologies enable you to track the exact Web pages, blogs and message boards that your teen visits. Many of these same products have filtering devices that prevent teens from viewing inappropriate content. Learn about this technology here.
- **Talk to other parents about how they monitor their teens,** especially in this age of gadgets and digital devices. Ask what has worked for them and what hasn't. Stay connected and share your stories to aid your monitoring activities and keep your kids safe.

Above all, don't feel uncomfortable with these tactics. Think of the online world in terms of a real neighborhood—would you let your teens hang out with a stranger down the street or have an unknown adult check in on your children while you are away? Probably not. The same types of precautions you'd take in your own neighborhood are the same types of precautions you should take in the virtual world. You can do it. You're supposed to do it. You owe it to them.

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